

## SOUKS AS URBAN CATALYSTS



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MOSUL / IRAQ



36°21'23"N 43°09'50"E

Cities like Mosul in Iraq, systematically destroyed by violent waves of conflict, pose serious design questions related to the needs and opportunities of reconstruction. Urban warfare techniques show how easy it is to conquer a city when services are part of a big centralized system that can be easily controlled in a short time frame. Housing deficits make the community more fragile; when Mosul was taken by the Islamic State or Daesh in 2014, there was a lack of 46,000 housing units in the city. Mosul's growth started in the 1950s when it went from just 145,000 inhabitants to 1,377,000 in 2014. The failures in planning attempts led to the spread of informal settlements with no services and infrastructures, greatly favoring social conflict.

The city grew along big commercial streets that are between 20 and 30 meters wide and surrounded by big parking lots, thus losing proportions, quality of space, and the social role they had in the historical core. Reconstruction calls for a strategy that can remedy the lack of houses, services, and community spaces, while stopping the horizontal growth of the city that in-

creases costs for new infrastructures. Interventions need to start from community spaces so as to reestablish facility buildings, promote economic growth, and provide a better quality of life.

In Middle Eastern cities, the center of public life and commerce is the souk, a system of covered streets flanked by businesses that spread into the tissue of the city, holding together institutional and facility spaces as the typical courtyard buildings. Souks have both a climatic and a structural role in the architecture of the city: they work as protection from sunlight and maximize internal airflow, are the structure along which buildings grow, and define a strong hierarchy of public and semiprivate streets that regulate functions and flows inside the city. The souks grew along the main streets that led to the city gates; then from the souk a second layer of internal streets branches off, surrounding groups of houses and ending in closed streets with private access to the single properties, defining subgroups of private houses inside the neighborhoods.

Articulated in a bottom-up process, increased and developed over time, the design aims to define and guarantee accessible public spaces through commercial and facility buildings that can trigger the reconstruction of private spaces, thus enhancing not only economic but also social development. New community and facility buildings will emerge in areas with destroyed buildings and along the width of big highways: they will have the same structure, designing a unique and integral system made of covered pedestrian paths and courtyards. This system can regulate and support the reconstruction of houses by owners and private investors inside an overall concept for the future city: the linear structures of souks will establish new borders for houses to be built using the same technology, sewing up the damaged urban fabric and densifying it. Souks, by changing the role of big highways, will permit the hierarchization of flows, distinguishing between commercial pedestrian paths, light mobility, streets, and semiprivate residential areas and hence guiding growth.







